

Latinidad in Austin, TX

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Latinidad in Austin, Texas

Over the past few months, I have been lucky enough to take my studies to Austin, Texas—just north of the same border/frontera famously described by everyone’s favourite Chicana theorist as ‘una herida abierta where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds’ (Anzaldúa, 1987, p.3). The Texas Gloria Anzaldúa wrote about in *Borderlands/La Frontera* was that of the Lower Rio Grande Valley, a little less than 300 miles from Austin; but even here at the edge of the edge of Latinidad, the border culture—Anzaldúa’s third country—makes its presence felt.

Austin is home to a tremendously lively Latin art scene: galleries like [Mexic-Arte](#), [La Peña](#), and [Women and Their Work](#) and organisations like [Changarrito Proyecto](#) and [the Serie Project](#) often showcase Latin art old and new from across the Americas. For all their diversity, these institutions make the promotion of artists local to the U.S.-Mexico border a priority: between them, a vibrant and exciting image of Latinidad in the Texas State Capitol emerges.

Typical of the types of exhibition that pop up in Austin, this February the Serie Project and printers [Coronado Studio](#) presented a selection of prints by the numerous Chicana women artists they have collected over recent decades. The collection, [Mujeres](#), promised to ‘speak to concerns that contemporary women witness and experience, and spark discussions around border issues, workers rights, feminist theory and heritage.’ Perhaps the most decisive contribution to this assertion of Chicana presence in Austin was [Melanie Cervantes](#)’ tribute to Anzaldúa, *Tumbling Down the Stairs of the Temple* (2012).



<http://serieproject.org/product/melanie-cervantes/>

This print, and its inclusion in *Mujeres*, makes unequivocal Anzaldúa's influence on artistas chicanas. Cervantes does not just quote Anzaldúa, but places her in front of the unmistakable [statue of Coatlicue](#), the Aztec Earth Goddess, and frames her with the human hearts symbolic of Coatlicue's necklace—as if Anzaldúa herself embodies

the mythological inheritance she advocated so strongly. Cervantes' print makes a remarkably clear statement about the inseparability of Anzaldúa's goal to 'overcome the tradition of silence' (Anzaldúa, 1987, p.54) from her use of mythology indigenous to the borderlands/la frontera.

This idea was complemented beautifully by the exhibition's crowning print, [Alma Lopez](#)'s *La Llorona Desperately Seeking Coyolxuahqui* (2003).



<http://serieproject.org/product/alma-lopez-2/>

Lopez's print pulls at least three culturally discrete stories of tragic motherhood into an icon memorialising the feminicidios in Ciudad Juárez. The print portrays a young woman with a funereal bouquet in the foreground, awash in a bright pink palette

redolent of the crosses used to represent missing women in Juárez. The silhouette in the background merges the images of two mothers famous for losing their children: the Catholic Virgen de Guadalupe and [la Llorona](#), a popular mythical figure in the borderlands/frontera who murdered her children for the love of a man and is accordingly doomed to wander her homeland crying for them. Overlaying the breast of the young woman is the disembodied head of Coyolxuahqui. In Aztec mythology, Coyolxuahqui was the daughter of Coatlicue: when Coatlicue became pregnant with another child, Coyolxuahqui led a jealous attack on her, and was subsequently beheaded by her brother; her head was thrown into the sky where it became the moon. Lopez's overwhelming fusion of so many mythological characters makes for a tragic icon: after all, the tragedy of la Llorona desperately seeking Coyolxuahqui is that the former is famously Earth-bound while the latter is famously lunar.

Similar to Cervantes, Lopez builds some hope into this image by placing the Coatlicue necklace at the centre of the image: as if we can make something out of the stasis of la Llorona's search for Coyolxuahqui by developing our understanding of the connections between these myths, or perhaps even reach Anzaldúa's 'Coatlicue State,' and find that in 'our greatest disappointments and painful experiences—if we can make meaning out of them—can lead us to become more of who we are' (Anzaldúa, 1987, p.46).

It has been exciting to discover that the Latin arts scene in Austin is building on an extremely rich, shared tradition of stories and imagery local to the borderlands. With one of the fastest-growing populations in the U.S., we can likely look forward to Austin becoming, like Los Angeles, Chicago, and New York, an increasingly important hub for Latin culture.